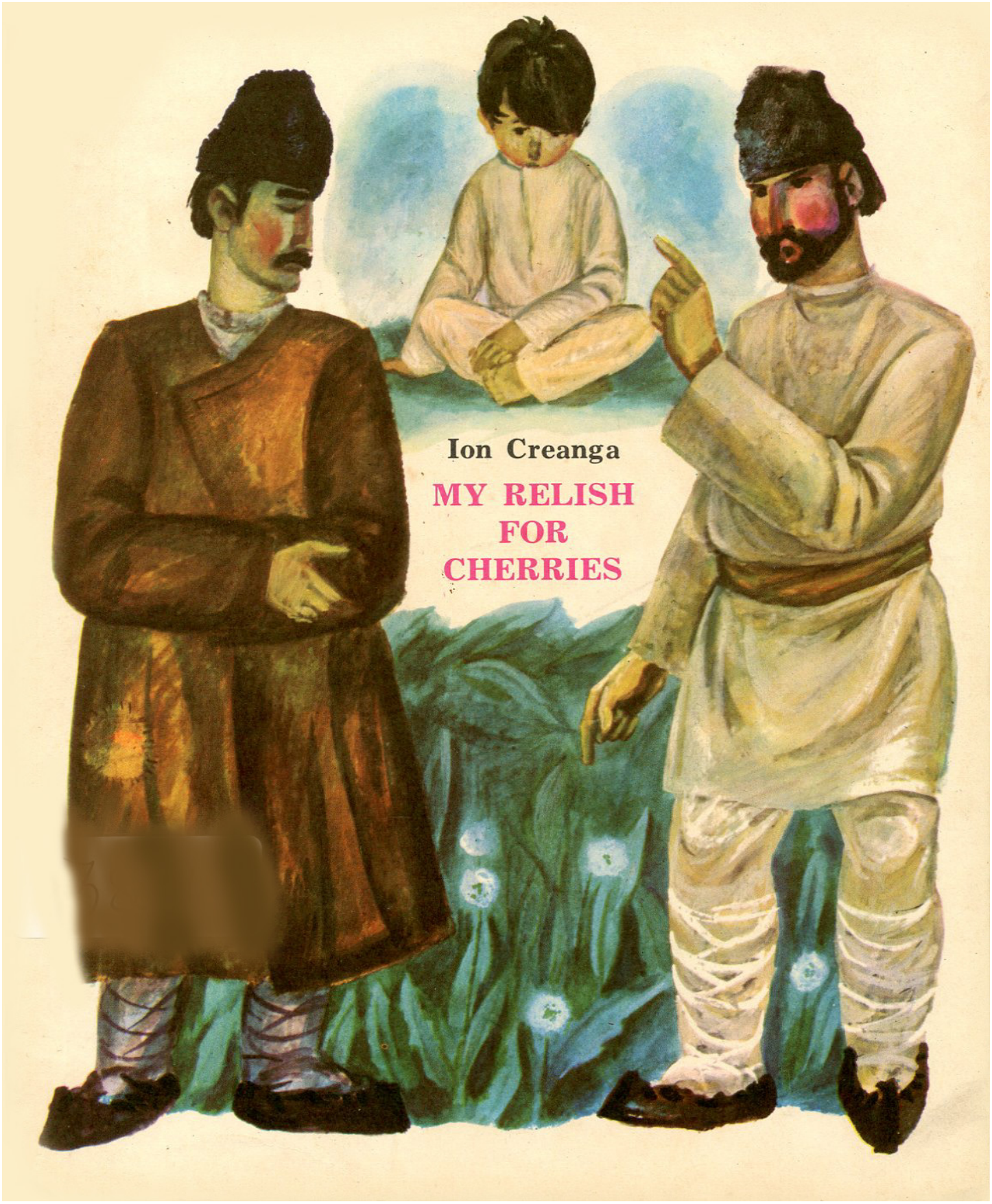

Ion Creanga

MY RELISH FOR CHERRIES

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MY RELISH FOR CHERRIES

(a Passage from
„Memories of my Boyhood")

Translated from Moldavian
by Dionisie Badarau

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And now, when it came to old Chiorpec, the shoemaker, our neighbour, what trouble I had with him! Or rather, to tell the truth, it was he who had trouble with me; for every now and then I would go and worry the life out of the poor man to get straps for a whip. More often than not I found old Chiorpec rubbing the finest birch-oil into the uppers of boots, making them as soft as cotton wool.

And the good man, seeing that there was no way of getting rid of me, would gently raise my chin with his left hand and with his right would dip the stick into the plateful of birch-oil and would give me a good rubbing round the muzzle, so that all the apprentices in the shop split their sides with laughing. And when I slipped out of his hands, I ran to my mother crying and spitting right and left.

"Look, mother, what that devil Chiorpec has done to me!"

"Oh, God, he has done as if I asked him to", mother said rejoicing. "I'll thank him, really I shall, when I meet him; for you stick like a burr wherever you go and worry anybody to death with your impertinence, idle wretch that you are!

On hearing that I quietly washed my face round about my mouth and saw to my troubles. And as soon as I forgot the trick he'd played on me, I ran back to old Chiorpec for straps, and as soon as he saw me coming in, he said in high spirits:

"Dear me! welcome, young pig's chap!" and again he gave

me a good rubbing, making a laughing stock of me, and again I ran home crying, spitting and cursing him, and mother had an awful time with me because of that.

"Oh! I do wish winter would come, so that I could send you somewhere to school again", mother said, "and I'll ask the teacher to give me back just the skin and the bones from your body".

Once when it was summer time about the Moshi festival, I slipped out of the house and went, in broad daylight, to uncle Vasile's, father's eldest brother, to steal some cherries; for only in his garden and in a couple of more places in the village, there stood a cherry tree the fruit of which used to

ripen about Whit Sunday. So I made very careful plans how to get cherries without being caught.

First of all I brazenly went into my uncle's house and asked if Ion could go swimming with me.

"He's not in", aunt Marioara said. "He has gone with your uncle Vasile, on the road by the Fortress, to a Fulling mill at Condreni to fetch back some coarse cloth".

By the way, I ought to tell you that in Humuleshti the spinning was done by both girls and boys, women and men; and the people of the village made many rolls of cloth and home-made spun of grey wool which were sold by the yard or made up into garments, to Armenian merchants who came for the purpose from other towns: Focshani, Bacau, Roman, Tyrgul-Frumos and elsewhere. The cloth was also sold either in the village or at fairs all over the country. The inhabitants of Humuleshti lived chiefly by this. They were landless free peasants and intinerant merchants trading in cattle, horses, pigs, sheep, cheese, wool, oil, salt, and maize flour; cloth coats — big ones, reaching down to the knees, and short ones, tight trouses, white cloth trouses, night gowns; carpets, either square with floral designs, or narrow runners; towels made of local silk with woven patterns and sundry other things. On Mondays they took all these things to the market or on Thursday to nun convents, because the fairs were not easy for them to get to.

"Well then, good-bye to you, aunt Marioara!" said I. "I'm very sorry that my cousin Ion is not in for I would have loved to go swimming with him".

But I said to myself: "It comes out to be all right! A good

thing they're not in, and if they don't return soon, so much the better".

And, to make a long story short, I kissed my aunt's hand, took my leave like a dutiful boy, left the house, pretending to go to the bathing place, but by clever dodging one way and another I found myself in the good woman's cherry tree and started to put cherries into the bosom, ripe or unripe, just as they came to hand. As I was anxiously hurrying on with the job as quickly as I could, I suddenly saw aunt Marioara, with a rod in hand, under the cherry tree.

"Well, you devil, but here is where you go swimming?" she said, with her eyes fastened on me. "Come down, you thief, and I'll teach you!"

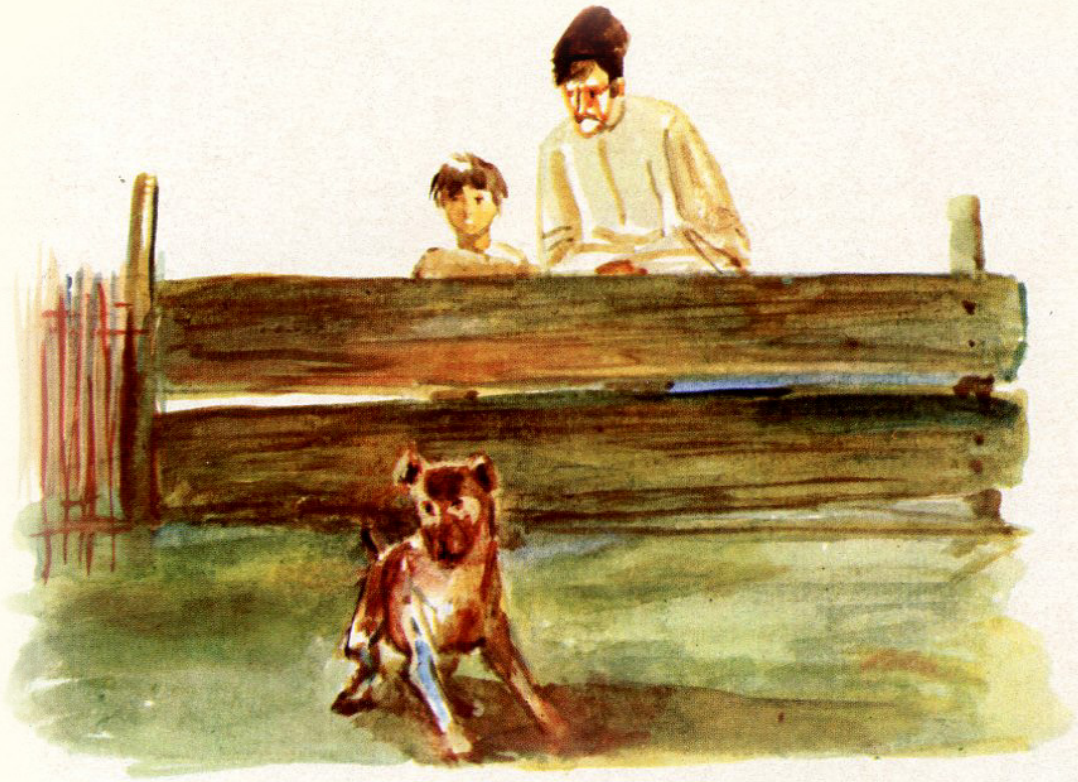
But how could I climb down when hell was down below at the foot of the tree? Seeing that I would not budge, she threw two or three clods of earth at me which came whizzing through the air but missed me. Then she started hoisting herself up the tree saying:

"Wait, you swine, your aunt Marioara will be the death of you, and pretty soon too!"

Upon this I swung down on to a branch nearer the ground and all of a sudden I jumped slap into some hemp that was growing beneath the cherry tree; it was still green and waist high. And crazy aunt Marioara rushed after me, and I ran like a hare across the field of hemp with her on my heels to the fence at the bottom of the garden, but I had no time to get over it, so back I turned, still across the hemp field, running like a hare, with my aunt after me, back to the cattle yard where again it was difficult to jump out, for there were fences everywhere along both sides and that skinflint of an aunt would not stop chasing me for the life of her! She very nearly laid hands on me! I went on running and she went on chasing, until we trod the whole field of hemp flat, and truth to tell, there were about ten or twelve square yards of fine hemp as thick as a brush all ruined! And after we had done that bit of a job, my aunt somehow got tangled up in the hemp or stumbled against something and down she went. Then I suddenly switched round like a swivel, took a couple of running jumps and vaulted over the fence without touching it, doubled back to cover my track, went home and was very good for the rest of the day.

But later that evening, uncle Vasile came along with

the mayor and the watchman, called father to the gate, told him what had happened and summoned him to attend a hearing of the case and ray a fine for the damages of the hemp and cherries, for, if the truth was to be told, uncle Vasile was a niggardly man and as much a skinflint as aunt Marioara. As the saying goes: they were like two halves of an apple. It was not much use saying anything. A man's work is his own concern. The evil was done and the one who bore the blame had to pay. It is not the rich but the guilty who pays, as the proverb says. And so father gave the horse from the cart for the damage I had caused and that was the end



of that. And after he returned shameful, he gave me the very harsh gruel I had ever got from him and said:

"There, take your fill of cherries! From now on, you have no more credit with me, you rascal! Do you think I'll go on paying much more for the damages you do?"

And that's how it happened with the cherries; mother's words, poor dear, had come true soon after: that God does not help him who steals. Yet what good is compunction after death? And my own shame what to do with it! Just try to face aunt Marioara if you please, uncle Vasile, cousin Ion, or even the boys and the girls of the village for that matter,

especially on Sundays at church, at the round dance where it is so lovely to stand apart and look, at the bathing places, or at Cherul Cucului the meeting place for lads and maids who had been pining for one another throughout the week, while at work.

Believe it or not, but I had made such a name for myself by the pranks I had been up so that I could hardly show my face for shame, and this was just at the time when a few pretty girls were growing up in the village and when my heart had begun to flutter somewhat. Just as the words say:

"Hey Ion, are the girls dear to you?"

"They are, indeed!"

"And you to them?"

"And they to me!.."

But what can one do? It too will pass off in time; nothing to it but to grow a thick skin, and let sleeping dogs

-lie. It has been the same with many other trials that I've been through in life, not just matters of a year or two with a defenite beginning and end, but recurrent troubles lasting several years, as one's turn comes round for grinding at the mill. And after all I did look out, in a kind of way, lest I got into another sort of trouble; but a very devil seemed to prompt me to stir up in trouble again.

And even after the cherry affair a new cause of distress arose.

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Ион Крянгэ

ЗА ЧЕРЕШНЯМИ

(на английском языке)

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